DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 382 CS 213 839

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TITLE Student-Centered, Not Teacher-Abandoned: Peer Response Groups That Work.
PUB DATE 1 Apr 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Peer Evaluation; *Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

A college composition instructor uses peer response groups in first-year composition, basic writing, and graduate courses because it seems to be a good alternative to more teacher-centered and teacher-dominated forms of education. The instructor has found the groups to be successful, but there are problems. Four typical problems are: the group member who is developmentally far behind her peers and offers only redundant comments; recent immigrants who usually dread and evade peer response groups; a group member (usually male) who constantly interrupts; and the very talented writer who overwhelms his peers. Group members dealing with these problems are indeed on task: they are learning that: (1) their suggestions may be redundant; (2) peer interaction can be avoided; (3) a reticent member can be persuaded to participate; (4) fine writing both pleases and dismays other group members; and (5) a power struggle for the floor can be won by an exasperated woman. The responsibility teachers have to distribute power in the classroom gives them choices: impose rules for group interaction, realizing that not all students are equal in ability; make power issues explicit, the subject of classroom study and discussion; and allow peer response groups to work these situations out on an individual basis without direct intervention. Teachers using peer response groups need to contemplate the implications of whatever instructional approach they take and decide how to empower their students in peer response groups. (RS)

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April 1, 1993
Conference on College Composition and Communication

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Student-Centered, Not Teacher-Abandoned: Peer Response Groups that Work

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Did you ever work in a peer response group in your college classroom? If you didn't, do you think your life as a writer would have been transformed if you had? If you were part of a peer group, did you find yourself entering and helping to shape a community of writers that evolved quickly and forever into a strong, positive, intellectually stimulating environment? Somehow I don't think many of us had this opportunity, especially those of us who graduated a decade or more ago. Those of us who did work in peer response groups probably had a wide variety of experiences, both transcendent and mundane. Yet as teachers many of us, including myself, tend to invest our energies heavily into peer response groups, expecting them to serve a whole host of functions: to act as an authentic audiences, to give writers and respondents means to develop and internalize ways of talking about writing, to create community, to change the classroom from teacher-centered to student-centered, to provide students with an opportunity for collaborative learning.

These are the reasons I use peer response groups--whether students are in first year composition, basic writing or graduate courses. Peer response groups seem to be a good alternative to what I consider more teacher-centered and teacher-dominated forms of education and to a great extent these groups are successful. Here's an example of what I consider success. In related research I am conducting with Sandy Lawrence of Mt. Holyoke,

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we analyzed what sixty-seven student respondents talked about in 25 peer response groups. Most of their comments were about aspects of the draft or the topic of the draft. Less than 1% of their talk was "off-task." So that's success, I've decided. Students are doing what I want: talking about their writing.

Comments about process--group work or composing process-- made up almost 27% of the discussion in the peer response groups we studied. Many of these process comments are procedural ("what page are you looking at?") while others are meant, as Denise David puts it, "to move the group along" ("did we answer all of your questions?") But here I look at a different kind of process comments--those that illustrate some of the very common situations that occur in peer groups, the problems I've seen again and again as I study transcripts. I then propose that we need to frame our teacherly solutions to such problems in ethical terms, thinking hard about what we know and believe about power, responsibility, democracy, and equality. The solutions are different for all of us but we can find them by thinking about our teaching philosophies and letting our most important goals guide us.

Problems:

Nobody will be surprised at the sort of problems I've seen as I've studied peer response groups in the last four years--shyness, developmental and cultural differences, anxiety, sex role stereotyping, minority students' reserve. Here's four very typical examples from transcripts of a years' worth of peer response groups in first year college writing classes.

First listen to Karen, a writer who is developmentally far behind her peers. She has been silent for the entire peer response session, the only

reticent individual in a lively and engaged group. Now the writer tries to draw her out:

Jane: Karen, Karen, want to add anything?

Karen: No, I really didn't [laughs].

Jane: Well what about it? What about it? Say something. Come on. Give me something.

Karen: Well, like I said in your letter, I just didn't know who your audience was.

Jane: OK.

Karen: And...then like a few grammar...grammatical mistakes I didn't understand...

Jane: OK

That's all Karen has to say. Her comments come at the end of this session after her peers have made these points many times. She happens to be working with a group of peers who are kind, who try to include her, but she doesn't say very much and what she does say is not new. What is this respondent learning here? What are her peers learning?

Here's Sarah, a Russian refusenik still new to the United States. She is a talented writer who dreads peer response groups because she feels incapacitated when asked to take an active role in the classroom. She doesn't like group work and deals with her discomfort by routinely bringing her weakest, most underdeveloped writing to her group meetings. She then tries to negotiate her way out of reading her work:

Chris: Sarah?

Sarah: There's nothing here to do.

Chris: Read the two pages.

Sarah: It's not two pages. It's just one page. I have an outline.

Chris: It's OK.

Martin: Just read it.

Sarah: Well. I don't want to read it. You guys just read it to yourselves.

Chris: Go ahead.

Martin: Got to do it sometime.

Chris: It's better now between three people instead of next week when it has to be like four. That's OK. Here we go.

Martin. Just read it.

Sarah [reads draft on rain forest]

Sarah knows that she's now supposed to talk about what she perceives as the strengths and weaknesses of her draft, asking for help with strategies. Her peers have done so at some length, both during this class session and many others. But this is how she opens her discussion:

Sarah: This is very incomplete and I don't have my information now.

Chris: OK. Um...when...how do you think you're going to um.... improve for the next draft? I mean, just talk.

Sarah: I'm going to get my information.

Chris: [laughs] OK Martin, go ahead.

Chris is a very talkative respondent under most conditions but she gives the floor to Martin because she can't seem to get Sarah to participate. Martin--not surprisingly--has the same troubles. What is Sarah learning

here? What are her two peers learning? Is it what we want them to learn? Do we really know?

Now here's Seth, a very talented young writer, who has written a draft far beyond the capabilities of most of his peers. His peers have praised his work, try to help him but feel overwhelmed. As Jennifer puts it, "it's like...you have to get NITPICKY with it, because it was just....it's so GOOD." Still, they are a very generous group and keep giving feedback until they end on this note:

Susan: I envy you for your writing.

Seth: Thanks.

Val: I mean, it's awesome.

Susan: Don't you envy his paper?

Val: Mine looks like shit in comparison.

Dan: [laughs] Mine looks like my little brother wrote it.

Susan: Mine looks like...um....[voice trails off]

What are these students learning? To use educational jargon, are these the "positive learning outcomes" we all want to see?

One more example. Male interruptions, I've discovered, are a chronic problem in peer response groups with open turntaking options--especially when the speaker is a woman. Val is apparently fed up with the many interruptions in this group, and the last group, and the group before that. So this is how she deals with the situation after having been interrupted a number of times, mostly by Dan.

Val: See now, I don't think that at all...

Dan: I do. I thought...I just left it...

Val: Can I say something? Will you let me speak?

Dan: Go ahead.

After capturing the floor by directly confronting Dan's interruptions, Val keeps it quite awhile. She seems to say everything that's on her mind about Dan's paper. Do you like the lesson here or not? Is this what we want?

I could go on--I have transcripts that illustrate any number of problems--but I'm sure you have the idea. I'd like to emphasize that these students are on task. But what they learning? If I problematize these situations sketched above, I see that while students are learning about writing and responding, they are also learning some lessons we don't often feel very comfortable addressing. Karen, the student who is developmentally so far behind her peers, is learning (probably for the umpteenth time) that she has very little to add and that what she does have to say has been said. Her peers, because they care about her, are learning questioning strategies to draw her out and being kind. Sarah, the Russian immigrant who both dislikes and fears peer groups, is polishing avoidance techniques while her peers are learning how to cajole (much as teachers learn) and learning to give up when their peer's resistance is too deep to overcome. Seth, the talented young writer, is learning that his writing both awes his peers and makes them feel insecure. His peers are discovering that while they have great respect for his writing, their own attempts look feeble in comparison. Val, the female writer who finally gets a turn by explicitly addressing the pattern of male interruptions in groups, is learning that she can get the floor if she takes risks. Dan is learning (maybe for the first time) that he can't talk every single moment, constantly interrupting his peers.

In other words, students in these groups learned many things: that their suggestions were redundant and thin, that peer interaction could be evaded with some hard work, that a reticent writer could be persuaded to participate with a concerted group effort, that fine writing both pleases and dismays other writers, that a power struggle for the floor can be won by an exasperated woman.

Are these good lessons to teach and learn? It all depends on what you're trying to do. That's the point I want to stress: when we think about peer response groups, we have to realize that removing ourselves from center stage is not going to solve the problems we face as teachers. Even though we're no longer at center stage, some students will be better writers than others, some will be better respondents, some will be more comfortable with student-centered instruction than others. As transcripts have shown me again and again, peer group talk evolves based on students' power, an authority that develops depending on group status, gender roles, communication skills, writing expertise, and personality. But as teachers we have both the prerogative and the responsibility to distribute power in our classrooms. And this power gives us a number of interesting choices:

Our first choice is this: realizing that all students are not "equal" (in writing ability, in status, in communication skills), we can impose our own rules for group interaction, structuring groups so that all students are required to participate in strict teacher-structured turn-taking sequences. This solution has its merits: everybody gets a chance because the teacher says she does. Some writers might benefit from such structure, especially adolescents struggling between peer loyalty and peer respondent roles.

But teacher-structured talk also has a lot of problems: we create a sort of phony democracy at best, a microcosm of the current traditional classroom at worst. The classroom dynamic is rigidly controlled, even more so in many ways than when the teacher is in charge of the discussion because turn-taking rules and permissible topics are set in stone. Denise David, Thia Wolf, Sandy Lawrence and I have all shown in different ways that high-functioning groups often move from talk about process to talk about task using conversational discourse patterns, including rhythmic variations in talk. But teacher-structured groups don't allow for any such originality among groups. Silent students are forced to speak because we assume they are reticent, unmotivated, or unappreciated. While silence might sometimes be receptivity, this is not privileged in teacher-structured peer response models. And those gifted and articulate students who would otherwise speak often and well are restricted to a specified length of time and range of comments. Their possible contributions are muted for the presumed good of the whole peer response group.

A second choice is this: making power issues explicit, the subject of classroom study and discussion. This solution has merit too. As Lisa Delprit writes, teachers do things to minority students for their own good far too often. "Those with power," she writes, "are frequently least aware of--or least willing to acknowledge--its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence." She also discusses the "codes of power," linguistic or communicative strategies not known to disenfranchised groups, maintaining that "if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier." This argument can be extended to women and to developmentally weaker

writers. As Deborah Tannen observes "...treating people the same is not equal treatment if they are not the same."

If we do decide to address power issues in the classroom, we can make our students our co-investigators rather than doing peer groups TO them. This involves making group issues explicit, sharing problems, negotiating solutions, reading and discussing the meaning of group transcripts, sharing audio-tapes--in short, making meta-analysis of group process a major classroom enterprise along with group process itself. Is this the best solution? Our students may never again have this opportunity to learn to communicate with each other--not in the big survey classes of most colleges. Unless we find ways to help all of our students, only those who are already effective communicators will continue to reap the rewards that come with deftness and comfort. And our students seem ready to start such work, according to a UCLA study of almost a quarter million first year college students at 404 schools. Student interest in promoting racial understanding, influencing social values and changing political structures is at a record high. College students are also deeply concerned about gender and communication.

But this solution also has problems. In these days of exhausted, demoralized, overworked teachers, does this add yet another task to the many impossible ones writing teachers undertake daily? Is the writing classroom an appropriate place to examine power relationships between and among people? Is this time-consuming and potentially intense work outside of our purview?

A third choice is this: understanding that the group process involves scraping up against fears, inadequacies, and weaknesses--and that power is

at the root of these struggles--we can decide to allow peer response groups to work these situations out on an individual basis without our direct intervention. That is, we can teach students to work in peer response groups and to talk about writing without ever addressing the sorts of situations that we know will evolve given students' differences.

But even if we decide this choice is the best one, I don't think we can ignore these power issues altogether, not if we believe it's our ethical responsibility to educate students. Our decisions will vary with our individual teaching philosophies and contexts. Our rationale for using peer groups can guide us. If our first principle is to create a multicultural community, including voices that have long been silenced, then many of us will require that students talk equally and many of us will deal directly with issues of power. If we want students to have a realistic audience, we will let some students talk more than others (the most engaged, the most aggressive, the most talkative). If we want students to learn how to write well and quickly, we will let the best students talk more (they know the most about writing). If we want equality, we will silence those who talk so much, give the floor to those with little or no power and teach them how to keep it.

Again, it all depends on what we're trying to do. But whatever we decide, we need to be aware that power issues in the classroom thrive in peer response groups, which are a microcosm of our classroom rather than a separate entity. We need to contemplate the implications of each of these paths and decide <u>how</u> to empower our students in peer response groups rather than abandoning them to somehow solve problems we haven't yet been able to solve ourselves.

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